MUSLIM HEAVEN

By Abdullah Yusuf Ali

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To write about the Muslim Heaven adequately is to describe the spiritual ideals of Islam and its conception of the Hereafter for those who follow the true laws of their being as being created by God and is explained in Revelation. Such a task would be beyond the scope of an Appendix. But I propose here to collect here a few matters which have been referred to in the space at the disposal of the notes. This is all more the necessary, as some ignorant critics of Islam imagine that Islam postulates a sensual heaven, and they press into service some garbled versions of what some of our own material-minded brethren have said on the subject.

2. It is true that Islam uses the most varied imagery for describing spiritual matters which are really beyond description in words except by such imagery. But it carefully avoids using such imagery for God Himself, lest it should be misunderstood by shallow minds, and confines the use of such imagery to the description of human beings, who have, in their present life, some material forms of pleasure, satisfaction, and happiness, and some mental and social relations which conduce to such feelings, and which may therefore be used legitimately to typify the moral spiritual joys and relationships of a spiritual Heaven. It knows nothing of the amours of gods and goddesses and the jealousies and bickerings that discover the Court of Jove; and yet Greek Mythology was the most refined of all Pagan Mythologies. In spite of all Wagner's efforts to glorify the Valkyrian heaven, we have yet in that heaven high actions and high passions in an atmosphere of frustration and strife. The Christian imagery of the vision of God and God's Throne is that of "a jasper and a

sardine stone," emeralds and crowns of gold, a sea of glass like unto crystal and four-and-twenty elders casting their crowns before the Throne, and glorifying God, but adding, "Thou hast created all things, and *for thy pleasure* they are and were created." (The concluding Book of the New Testament: The Revelation of St. John the Divine, Chapter IV). Our imagery never carries these metaphors to the Person of God, and we were not taught that the object of creation these metaphors to the Person of God, and we are not taught that the object of creation is God's pleasure; our teaching is that man was created for man's self-development and his attainment of his high destiny, which can be done by his understanding, obeying, and knowing God.

3. Our doctrine of the Hereafter is not strictly a doctrine of Rewards and Punishments. A promise of rewards implies two things: (1) an inducement to a certain course of action by the motive of winning the reward; and (2) the apportionment of the reward to the merits and deserts of the receiver.

As to the motives, see iii. 31:—

Say: "If ye do love God,
Follow me: God will love you
And forgive you your sins:
For God is Oft-Forgiving
Most Merciful.

Or again, in ii. 165 we have:—

But those of Faith
Are overflowing
In their love for God.

Certainly whatever good we do benefits our own souls, but the motive with which we should do it should be only as "seeking the glory (literally, Face, Countenance) of God" (ii. 272). The righteous persevere

patiently in righteousness, seeking "the Countenance of their Lord" (xiii.22).

4. Is the "Reward" apportioned to the merits or deserts of the receiver? Not at all. At best, our merits or deserts can amount to very little. But God's Mercy and Grace are vast and all-embracing (vi. 147). He has said: "My Mercy extendth to all things" (vii. 156): His Grace is universal and all-pervasive; and "he is the Lord of Bounties unbounded" (iii. 74). If any man does good, "the reward to him is better than his deed: but if any does evil, the doers of evil are only punished to the extent of their deeds" (xxviii. 84). Thus His justice is strict but in favour of man; but his Grace is beyond calculation. "That which ye lay out for charity, seeking the Countenance of God, will increase: it is these who will get a recompense multiplied" (xxx. 39). See also n. 5909 to lxxviii. 36.

5. To be righteous merely for the hope of reward for one's self or fear of punishment may be good at a certain elementary stage of spiritual progress when higher motives are yet unintelligible. But as the light of Islam illumines the soul more and more, it is seen that virtue is its own reward and evil is its own punishment: for the one accords with the Will of God,—and the other is contrary to it—and therefore also contrary to the pure nature of man as made by God, —"God's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change let there be in the work wrought by God: that is the standard Religion" (xxx. 30). "Is there any Reward for Good —other than Good?" (lv. 60). We are asked to "repent" when we have fallen into evil. But "repentance" does not mean sackcloth and ashes, or putting on a gloomy pessimism. It means giving up disease for health, crookedness (which is abnormal) for the Straight Way, the restoration of our nature as God created from it from the falsity introduced by the enticements of Evil (n. 3543 to xxx. 31). The "fear of

God" is the beginning of wisdom; but it is not the fear in the ordinary sense of the term, for on the righteous "there shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (ii. 38). The fear of God is not a passive oppression by an outside feeling, but an active assertion of our own will not to offend our Lord ands Cherisher. The fear is lest we lose His Good Pleasure. It is akin to love, and is a purification of our will. It is on our will that our future depends under the Grace and Mercy of God. We must strive to reach His Grace. Our strength is small, but He will accept the submission of our will (Islam), and His Grace will search us out, and our progress will proceed according to the Law which God in His wisdom has established.

6. Thus it becomes the doctrine of Law, or of "fruits of actions". Every deed must have its inevitable consequences (n. 4671 to xliii. 73). There is no vicarious atonement; for there is individual responsibility. And yet it is not a doctrine of "justification by deeds"; for the best of our actions fall short of the "heaven" which we hope for (see paragraph 4 above). Nor is it the same as the doctrine of *Karma*, which plays so prominent a part in Buddhist and Hindu philosophy. For we have a lively faith in god's Grace and Mercy: it can and does intervene for us and accepts our repentance and amendment, and give us fresh chances at every stage of our probationary life. But our will is an important factor: we cannot accept a mechanical form of Determinism which eliminates the human will in the government of the microcosm within us, and even eliminates such a thing as the Divine Will in the government of the Macrocosm, or the great world without us.

7. Such being the fundamental aspects of our life and destiny, how can we best clothe our ideas of heaven in human language? Our Heaven is independent of Time, or Place, or fleeting Circumstance. No one can know precisely now the spiritual delights hidden in reserve for him

(xxxii. 17). But we must necessarily use terms that imply all these three conditions. Therefore they can only be expressed by allegory or imagery. If we understand what the essence of the allegory or imagery is, we shall profit by it. If we branch out into fantastic applications that leave us in the material world, we shall never be able to get a glimpse of the spiritual world into which such allegory or imagery is intended to open a window for our spiritual eyes. Such allegory or imagery is supplied in abundance in the Qur'an.

8. The simplest and yet the most far-reaching allegory that we can employ is that of the Garden —Garden of Bliss (*Jannat or Jannat un Na'īm*, v. 65). In all Muslim languages, that word *Jannat* (Garden) is now specialized for Heaven. Let us analyze a few of the ideas which we can legitimately associate in this connection with the concrete word "Garden," and the abstract term "Bliss".

9. In this our life most of our sensations depend upon sense perceptions, and we can reduce the highest and noblest of them to terms connected with the Garden. To each of our five senses, in their most refined forms, does the Garden minister. For the eye there is general green, with all the most delicate tints of the green in the foliage, and the wonderful colours and shapes in flowers; the arrangement of paths and parterres; the various gradations of light and shade; the soft and melting beauty of clouds and mists; and the landscape views with cool rivers flowing underneath, or perhaps murmuring brooks. For the ear is the music of birds, the music of waterfalls, and the appropriate moonlight music of the human voices with or without the accompaniment of an instrument like a guitar. For the smell there is not only the perfume of flowers but the more subtle scents of foliage, moisture or morning dew, or even garden soil. For taste and touch the exquisite fruits, and for touch the

soft rose petals and the carpet-like lawns, besides the gentle kiss of breezes, all minister to the highest bliss and fulfilment that we can imagine through our senses.

10. We picture not only a garden, but a Garden with rivers or springs flowing beneath. This further enlarges our horizon. We can picture a landscape with banks, terraces, and sloping lawns, high ground, and valleys. What is the spiritual analogy for this? We must not imagine a dull place where all are engaged in perpetual psalm-singing. There will be differences in ranks, dignities, and tastes, according to each individual's growth and individuality: for that is the meaning of the persistence of Personality. And yet they will form one equal classification according to the varying spiritual experiences gained in this life: (1) the **Prophets** who taught and led mankind; (2) the sincere **Devotees** of **Truth**, who supported the **Cause** in their person and with all their resources; (3) the **Martyrs** and **Witnesses**, who suffered and served; and (4) the righteous people generally, those who led ordinary lives, but always with righteous aims. All these are united in one beautiful Fellowship (see iv. 69, and n. 586). Or take the other classification indicated in lvi. 27 and 11: the righteous generally, the Companions of the Right Hand (as distinguished from the Companions of the Left Hand, who will not have reached Heaven), and those nearest to God in rank and dignity. The later will have no interposing Veils of Light to obscure the pure Light of God from them (Appendix VIII, and xxiv. 35); for, in Ṣūfī language, they will have had the ineffable Bliss of seeing the "Divine Eyes". Possibly the Companions of the Garden and Those on the Heights (vii. 46) refer to the same two categories of souls. Whatever the precise interpretation of these mystic passages may be, there is no doubt that the retention of individual Personality in the Hereafter will mean Bliss of different kinds for each category.

11. How can we understand a psychological term like Bliss in general symbolical terms? If it is to convey the idea of satisfaction in any but abstract terms, we must have the symbolism of ordinary life, yet lifted up to ideas of refinement, delicacy, and satisfaction. The acts of eating and drinking are spiritualised and socialised. The choicest of meats, fruits, and drinks, which minister to the sensitive taste, will be provided. Dress of most artistic taste will add dignity to social intercourse, and there will be thrones and symbols of honour. There will be companionship, individual companionship, companionship of equal age, as well as general companionship. And those who loved in this life — mothers, wives, sisters, relatives, children, friends — will all add to our joy by their company in a transformed Love as superior to earthly Love as is in the Garden of Heaven to an earthly Garden. The condition of Faith and good Life is of course attached: for no disharmony can enter to mar the dignity of Heaven. (See xiii. 23 and n. 1837; xliii. 70-72, and n. 4668-70). Perfected Love will not be content with Self, but like a note of music will find its melody in communion with others.

12. Carnal sex has of course no place in Heaven, but sex in our constitution here has a mental and psychological value, which we can picture in our transformed and perfected Love above. The word Hūr, in such passages as xliv. 54, and lii. 20, has been much misunderstood and misrepresented. Grammatically it is not feminine in form, and the companionship of *Hūrs* will be for all in Heaven — men and women (as they were in life), who will retain their personality but not their carnal attributes. As in the word "angel" in English, (unlike its original Angelos in Greek or Angelus in Latin), there is with it an association with the especially feminine virtues of purity, grace, beauty, innocence, truth, and good-will (see n. 4729 to xliv. 54). In lxxviii. 33 are mentioned Maidens or Virgins of Equal Age, in a highly symbolical passage, where the notes may

be consulted. But the masculine virtues of handsome and manly strength and the youthful enthusiasm for service are also mentioned in association with heaven (see lii. 24, and n. 5058). In other words the symbolism leads up from our ideas of beauty, grace, harmony, strength, youth, and service as we know these things in their most refined forms here, to something even nobler and purer which no language can adequately describe.

13. The symbolism of Springs or Fountains and Cups of Drink or Wine is also worked out in a beautiful way in S. lxxvi. (*Dahr*). Note that the Arabic word *Sharāb* means *either* Drink or Wine, and in Ṣūfī language, Wine or the Cup is the means of attaining spiritual Ecstasy. The Quranic language tempers Ecstasy with Coolness, and associates a refreshing tonic, rather than an unbounded ecstasy, with spiritual fervour, especially in the earlier stages of spiritual Bliss, when the soul is yet new to its new world. Just after the Great Event of Judgement is passed, the righteous soul enters the regions of Bliss, and is given to drink of a Cup from the mystic fountain of Kāfūr (ixxvi. 5, n. 5835). ***Kāfūr*** literally means camphor: in symbolical language it stands for all that is wholesome, cooling and refreshing, soothing and agreeable. This is provided in un-stinted measure. Then the yearning humility which filled with the souls in the lower life gives place to a sense of possession: dignity and honour, typified by light silk garments, thrones, and the humility now shown to them by those around them (lxxvi. 12-14). Then comes the setting of Magnificent Realm, typifying Divine Glory. A drink of a Cup of Zanjabīl, typifying warmth and zest to the taste, from a fountain called *Sal-sabīl* ("Seek the Way"), festive clothes of ceremony, and rich setting of a Royal Banquet of beauty and splendour, stand as symbols to show the approach to the very Presence Ineffable. Further, there is a Spring or Fountain *Tasnīm*, which is only drunk neat by those Nearest to God,: they alone can bear its fullest flavour, as they alone can bear the full effulgence of the Glory of God: but

every righteous man will have a taste of this Fountain mixed with his heavenly Wine, to the extent that his spiritual advancement is capable of enjoying it (lxxxiii. 27-28).

14. For the highest Felicity in heaven is described to be in the nearness to god, in the Good Pleasure of God. See iii. 14-15:—

"Fair in the eyes of men
Is the love of things they covet:
Women and sons;
Heaped-up hoards of gold and silver;
Horses branded (for blood and excellence);
And wealth of cattle
And well-tilled land.
Such are the possessions
Of this world's life;
But nearness to god
Is the best of the goals.

"Say: Shall I give you
Glad tidings of things
Far better than those?
For the righteous are Gardens
In nearness to their Lord,
With rivers flowing beneath;
Therein is their eternal home;
With Companions pure and holy;
And the Good Pleasure of God."

But the Good Pleasure of God has its counterpart in the Good Pleasure of man, raised to such eminence in Heaven,

"O thou soul!
In (complete) rest and satisfaction!
Come back thou
To thy Lord! —
Well-pleased (thyself),
And well-pleasing
Unto Him!

"Enter, thou, then,
Among My Devotees, —
Yea, enter thou
My Heaven!"

(lxxxix. 27-30)

15. This, then, is the Muslim idea of Salvation. It consists, not in being saved from the consequences of our sins by the sufferings or the merits of others, nor in *Nirvana*, or annihilation or absorption, — but in the achievement of a perfected Personality, a Bliss that grows up within us, and does not depend on external circumstances. It may require the utmost effort or striving (*Jihād*) of a lifetime or more. But it is the Supreme Achievement, the attainment of all desires, the Felicity *in excelsis* (xliv. 57, and n. 4733).

16. The several aspects of it are summed up in two passages of singular beauty, xxxvi. 55-58, and lii. 17-28, which should be studied along with the notes thereon. The first passage describes symbolically the *mise en scène* and the nature of the Bliss. It goes on to say that the happiness will not be solitary, but will be shared in association, on thrones of dignity and peace. It further figures the psychological inner satisfaction, unconnected

with outer circumstances, but reflecting the inner tastes of Personalities: "they shall have whatever they call for": the musician's heaven will be full of music; the mathematician's will be full of mathematical symmetry and perfection; the artist's will be full of beauty of form: the Light will be one, but its rays will be many. And it winds up with the salutation of "Peace!" from God, Whose supreme glory is Mercy, Peace, and Harmony. In the second passage these points are again emphasized but from other points of view. Not only will there be individual satisfaction and social bliss, but it will be shared by families or friends whom we held dear in this life, provided their life made them worthy of that association. While the memory of love and all good in this life will endure, it will be purged of all old fears and anxieties in the supreme realisation— the crown and climax of the whole — that God is the One Reality— the Good, the Beneficent and the Merciful. The souls in Heaven will realise in the highest spiritual sense the Presence of God.